

Progressing the Image to the Word:

A Critical Study of the Cut-Ups

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“Remember that the written word is an image; that the first writing was pictorial and so painting and writing were at that time a single operation. Historically, they do not separate until we have a highly stylized pictorial writing, as in Egyptian, which of course developed much later.” (Burroughs)

Abstract

William S. Burroughs began the eleventh lecture of his undergraduate course at the City College of New York by opening with, “In the last class we considered writing as a magical operation” (Burroughs). While he doesn’t define the “magic” of it, Burroughs continues to justify this statement by explaining that magical operations enable one to produce qualitative and quantifiable results to any given experiment. Burroughs also claims that this process of magical experimentation offers insight into generalized criteria for the evaluation of any given text; and that within the experiments themselves resides insight into how to produce successful writing.

While Burroughs is often discussed in literary circles as a prominent pioneer in literary deconstructionism, I am interested in approaching Burroughs in quite the opposite way. I want to move Burroughs away from the label of “deconstructionist,” at least in the general sense. Burroughs’ efforts are often seen as postmodern movements towards abstracting the word from its meaning, but his constant attacks upon linear language, not language itself, offers another motivation. The extensive, and exhaustive process of trial and error in the cut-up method contextualized alongside the personal affinity that Burroughs had for Egyptian hieroglyphs, and his strong push towards imagism offers an alternative motive for Burroughs’ extensive application of the technique: reunification of image and language.

Using the drafts available at the RBML, an extensive reading and transcribing of lecture notes, and an interview with James Grauerholz, Burroughs’ editor and literary executor, I sought to create a comprehensive study of the cut-ups, their intentions, their misperceptions, and ultimately, the practicality of their use. By first exploring the origins of the cut-ups and then moving onto

their methodology, I am able to contextualize the argument, and its counterpoints, presented within the third section of the paper.

“There were many different methods of cutting text, but they all had one thing in common: they introduced a random juxtaposition of texts to give new word combinations.” (Miles)

Part 1: Original Cuts

Through an experimental writing project developed by William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin, Sinclair Beilles, and Gregory Corso came *Minutes to Go*, a limited-print poetry collection that compiled the first exhibitions of the cut-up technique. Released in 1960, the project was initially dismissed by literary critics on the foundation that the text was “dismissed as unreadable...” (Lydenberg xi). With the rise of abstractionism alongside the developing avant-garde poets, it has since then become an exemplary, and celebrated insight into the origins of the cut-up technique embellished by Gysin and Burroughs.

The poetics project began in the autumn of 1959 at the Beat Hotel in Paris, France when Brion Gysin began cutting up and cutting out headlines and subtitles of the *New York Herald Tribune*. What Gysin found to be amusing, Burroughs “immediately recognized its importance as a technique” (Miles). The two began experimenting together with cut-ups of headlining magazines and began to draft ways to alter and refine the art. Burroughs said of the experiments, “Cut-ups establish new connections between images, and one’s range of vision consequently expands” (Miles). Burroughs believed that word and image were to go hand in hand but believed that forward progress meant to “rub out the word.” But what does that mean? To Burroughs, it meant to transcend the barriers of a linear linguistic system bound to and limited by its signifiers. Believing that uniting the word and the image could push thought to a state of “imagism,” Burroughs found that readers could be trained to break linear thought. Burroughs readers were somewhat familiar with this concept, as the narrative style of *Naked Lunch* had already adopted an alternative narra-

tive track, instead focusing on a mosaic-style of loosely connected vignettes to present the story in its entirety.

The cut-up experiments sought to push this style even further, to entirely abandon narrative creation as it was known. The titular poem of *Minutes to Go* acts as a sort-of manifesto for the reading of the proceeding pieces in the book, but it also offers an important insight into the creative motivation of the cut-ups. Gysin writes,

Pick a book any book cut it up
cut up
prose
poems
newspapers
magazines
the bible
[...]
there is no longer a need to drum up a season of geniuses
be your own agent until we deliver
(Beiles)

Photo: Pictured here is a JPEG scan of the selected verse from my own copy of *Minutes to Go*.

Pick a book any book cut it up
cut up
prose
poems
newspapers
magazines
the bible
the koran
the book of moroni
la-tzu
confucius
the bhagavad gita
anything
letters
business correspondence
ads
all the words

The system which has so often been labeled ‘literature deconstructionism’ was developed off of what Burroughs perceived as the preceding ‘cut-ups’ of American literature at his time of writing *Minutes to Go*. This consisted primarily of Burroughs’ reading of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which also utilized the vignette style of *Naked Lunch*, but did so by ‘cutting up’ these scenes of contemporary life alongside legends of the Holy Grail and its keepers. Burroughs saw this an early example of the style that he would go on to incorporate and eventually make signature. Alongside the 434-line poem, Burroughs also cites the ‘hat poem’ of Tristan Tzara as an early inspiration.

The titular poem of *Minutes to Go* by Brion Gysin echoes the thoughts of the anti-Dada artist, who was forced from the group by André Breton for pulling words from a hat and creating a poem from the randomly selected words. This process of randomized composition created an outrage in the surrealist community of the ’20s (Jones). This initial experiment offered a way to separate the idea of poetry from the practice of it. Aware of the intimidating intentionality of creative writing, Tzara effectively forced spontaneity into composition by creating a supplemented word bank from which he would draw words and phrases at random, blindly. This took the deliberation away from the constitution of poetry, or in other words, removed the need for a ‘season of geniuses.’

The Burroughs cut-up method originated much in the same way with Burroughs and Gysin tediously slicing through newspapers, line by line, and effectively studying the prolific meanings that could come of various rearrangements. It wasn’t until the development of a system, however, that the experiments took off. What had begun as a monotonous process eventually developed

into what came to be known as the first extended system of splicing texts: what I will call “cut-up collaborations.”¹

These collaborations consisted of Burroughs cutting up other writers’ material, primarily magazines, and then proceeding to sort through them for prolific meanings; or in the case of Burroughs, the sound of explosive literary material. Gysin and Burroughs also spent a significant amount of time experimenting with cut-ups of Rimbaud, Pound, and Shakespeare that they then placed alongside and between news clippings from the magazines. Sometimes this offered prolific literary collages, but the process was grueling, and they grew tired of cutting single lines.

Gysin and Burroughs quickly developed a faster system for creating cuts of other material, one that didn’t require slicing singular lines, phrases or ideas, but instead allowed for an entire page to be rearranged:

A page of text from a book, a magazine, a newspaper, or a letter was simply cut into four sections. The margins were trimmed off and the sections were moved against each other until a likely phrase or sentence was found. This was typed out on a new sheet of paper. (Miles)

These cut-ups were shared with fellow members of the Beat Hotel, namely Gregory Corso and Sinclair Beiles.² They began collaborating, and the pieces yielded from their experiments were eventually released as *Minutes to Go*, published on December 24, 1959. A second edition of the material was reportedly being developed alongside the initial publication, but due to issues with

¹ This title is used in direct reference to a quote from Robin Lydenberg’s thesis *Word Cultures: Radical Theory and Practice in William S. Burroughs’ Fiction*, in which she states “He develops detached, precise, scientific methods of observing and recording the world around him; he introduces chance as a factor in composition; and he embraces an ideal of contact and collaboration not only with his readers but with ‘many writers living and dead’”(Lydenberg).

² Gregory Corso immediately dismissed the project upon its finish and publication. He explicitly spoke out against his participation at the end of *Minutes to Go* writing, “I have agreed to join Mr. Gysin, Mr. Beiles, and Mr. Burroughs in this venture and so to the muse I say, ‘Thank you for the poesy that cannot be destroyed that is in me’-for this I have learned after such a short venture in uninspired machine-poetry” (Beiles 63). Sinclair Beiles went on to further venture with the cut-up technique, critically cutting material texts until they were devoid of any meanings. This caused tension between Burroughs and Beiles, whom eventually left the creative group for their next publication *The Exterminator* (Miles 364).

Beiles and Corso, the project was ultimately re-imagined and rearranged to exclusively showcase the works of Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs. It was titled *The Exterminator* and was published in 1960 by David Haselwood at Auerhahn Press in a limited 1,000 print run. The ‘second’ *Minutes* sought to refine and rework the techniques of the first collaboration in what they described on the book’s back cover as an attempt to ‘rub out the word.’

The works are an important part of Burroughs’ early writings as they showcase a poesy in Burroughs that largely disappeared in the later years. The cut-ups featured in both *Minutes to Go* and *The Exterminator* offer an valuable insight into this era of the cut-ups as they retain a poetic structure in the composition that mostly disappeared upon further expenditures into the technique. On his website, *RealityStudio*, Jed Birmingham writes,

The Exterminator presents Burroughs at the dawn of his most radically experimental period. The idea of Burroughs as a poet has largely gone unnoticed. This may be due to the rarity of the two key texts in question: *Minutes to Go* and *The Exterminator*. But in the time between the *Olympia Naked Lunch* and the *Olympia Soft Machine* (late 1959 to mid-1961), Burroughs appeared before the public as much as a poet than as a novelist. (Birmingham)

While Burroughs had hoped for the print to be a commercial success, his publisher immediately felt quite differently. Birmingham goes on to quote the displeasure that Haselwood felt at the time of receiving the manuscript, “[T]hey thought they would be very rich and famous. Can you imagine, from a cut-up book[...]These are almost impossible to read” (Birmingham). The book did better than Haselwood initially thought and was reprinted seven years later.

After publishing *The Exterminator* Burroughs began working on a novel-length cut-up experiment called *The Soft Machine*. The novel, first published in Paris in ’61, was infamously the recipient of four alternative editions to the text.³ Each edition sought to add more to the novel by reworking sections or entirely replacing them with new content. As in the case of Haselwood, the

³ It is important to clarify that all further references unless explicitly stated, are made in direct reference to the first American printing of *The Soft Machine* in 1966.

reception was that of begrudging frustration. In a 1968 book review *The New York Times* writer Herbert Gold summarizes his frustration,⁴

I am tempted to offer him advice, for which I expect no gratitude. I would like to see him apply his wit and Puritan rage to direct expression of the conditions of his life and times. I would like to lock up his scissors and paste and make him tell it straight from beginning to end, as if he were on a train trip with a new friend. And then perhaps he could sit down and think about it afterward, and even rewrite; and if he promises to be discreet I would like to lend him back his scissors for the purpose of the swift and paced organization of which this gifted man is surely capable. (Gold)

Gold's call for Burroughs to lay down the scissors was not met, and what was essentially his first novel-length cut-up experiment would also become the first in a trilogy of cut-up novelizations. Thus *The Soft Machine* stands as Burroughs' first attempt to amalgamate cut-ups with linear narrative.

The initial small press cut-up publications acted not only as an insight into the poetic system that Burroughs held the cut-ups to but also as a period of manifestos in which Gysin and Burroughs explicitly state various ways in which to read their finished pieces. In this way, the era of *Minutes to Go* and *The Exterminator* alongside their novel length companion respectively become the origin point and transition stages of Burroughs' subsumption of cut-ups.

While this may initially seem a small feat to be ignored, much of Burroughs' proceeding cut-up experiments (whether novel or not) were met with harsh criticism for their lack of linear narrative, which seems at odds with the very intention of the writing. Oliver Harris writes of this on *RealityStudio* saying, "[...] Burroughs criticism has taken a surprisingly conventional literary approach to a project conceived so radically in opposition to the conventions of literature" (Harris).

⁴ The review is dated for March 20, 1968. This review could pertain to the 1966 Grove Press printing, or the 1968 John Calder printing in Great Britain.

The criticism was even worse when Burroughs released *Dead Fingers Talk* in 1963. Published in a run of 4,000 copies, the book was the center of debate upon release, not unlike Burroughs' other work. Wikipedia describes the novel as combining "sections from Burroughs' earlier novels, *Naked Lunch*, *The Soft Machine*, and *The Ticket That Exploded*, in an attempt to create a new narrative" (Wikipedia). The novel was such a hot topic that it became the center of a 13-week literary debate in *The Times Literary Supplement* of which Jed Birmingham writes,

John Willett got the ball rolling with a negative review of Burroughs' work simply titled "Ugh!" Edith Sitwell, Michael Moorcock, Victor Gollancz, Anthony Burgess, and Eric Mottram all got into the act on both sides of the argument. The book generated just the right kind of controversy[...]"(Birmingham)

Due to the controversial release of *Dead Fingers Talk*, the correspondence featured in the *Times Literary Supplement* was eventually repackaged and retitled as "The UGH Correspondence" alongside a 1982 updated publication of *Naked Lunch*. Thus, *Dead Fingers Talk* marks an important moment in the developing bibliography of Burroughs as it marks the moments that Burroughs transitioned from cutting up others in *Minutes to Go*, to cutting himself up alongside others in *The Nova Trilogy*. Finally, he recuts novel-length works of his 'own' writing to create new narratives, further abstracting the 'collaborated' works from their original source material.

It should seem only fitting that the greatest cut-up controversy came at the time of Burroughs' release of re-cuts of his novel-length cut-ups. If the world had not noticed the technique before, attention was certainly garnered at the release of *Dead Fingers Talk*, but it wouldn't be for another fifteen years that Burroughs and Gysin would collectively release the ultimate manifesto to their methodology: *The Third Mind*. It is this creative duo that would go on to further explore every aspect of the cut-up method and its processes. From smaller experiments like "Apo-33: A Metabolic Regulator" and "The Dead Star" to the larger, novel-length experiment of *The Book of*

Breeething, Gysin and Burroughs moved past cutting and reorganizing text to develop various, multifaceted approaches to ‘the cut-up.’

"The best writing seems to be done almost by accident but writers until the cut-up method was made explicit—all writing in fact cut-ups; I will return to this point—had no way to produce the accident of spontaneity." (Burroughs)

Part 2: Minding Methodology

In "The Cut-up Method of Brion Gysin" Burroughs extensively discussed the techniques used to create the first cut-up poems.⁵ The cut-up emphasized the benefits of the collage technique used in painting for over fifty years prior to Burroughs' experiments in writing. While previous examples laid in Tzara and others, Burroughs sought to push the collage even further. Believing that to break linear narrative would lead to the ability to break linear thought, Burroughs teamed with Gysin to create a methodology towards 'rubbing out the word.'

The Third Mind begins with a 1966 William S. Burroughs interview by Conrad Knickerbocker for *Paris Review*. Burroughs thought that all writing was cut-ups, and would continue to suggest this notion upon being asked about the technique in future interviews. Burroughs believed that all writing was cut-ups, and would continue to suggest this notion upon being asked about the technique in future interviews. Burroughs also believed perception itself to be cut-up, but that it occurred at a subconscious level, and that a person could not decisively free-write themselves a cut-up. To recreate the process that occurs without one's knowledge, one must remove the prod-

⁵ While much of the texts that will be referred to in this chapter first appeared in *Minutes to Go*, I will be referencing the editions printed in *The Third Mind* printed by Seaver Books in 1973.

uct from the process. In the opening interview of *The Third Mind*, Burroughs discusses this phenomenon with the interviewer,

INTERVIEWER: Instead of going to the trouble of working with scissors and all those pieces of paper, couldn't you obtain the same effect by simply free-associating at the typewriter?

BURROUGHS: One's mind can't cover it that way. [...] Suppose I should cut this down the middle here, and put this up here. Your mind simply could not manage it. It's like trying to keep so many chess moves in mind, you just couldn't do it. The mental mechanisms of repression and selection are also operating against you. [...] cut-ups make explicit a psychosensory process that is going on all the time anyway. Somebody is reading a newspaper, and his eye follows the column in the proper Aristotelian manner, one idea and sentence at a time. But subliminally he is reading the columns on either side and is aware of the person sitting next to him. That's a cut-up. (Burroughs)

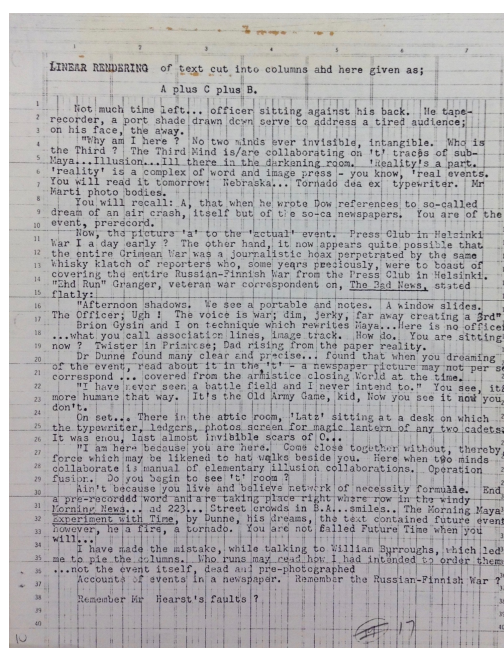
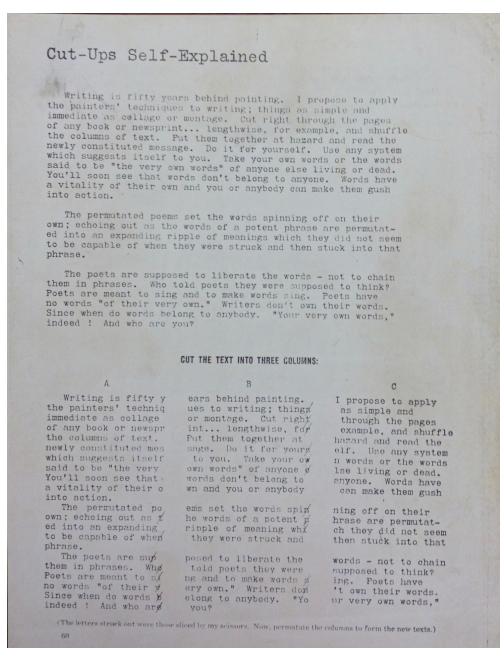
The interview discusses Burroughs' affinity with progressing towards what he described as the 'silent state.' When asked further about this, Burroughs explains the limitations of the word and proposes that to move past linear thought might open ways to train the consciousness to "think in association blocks rather than words" (Burroughs).

In *The Third Mind*, Burroughs interjects that words have "lost meaning and life through years of repetition" during his initial explanation of how a reader may create their own cut-up (Burroughs). Further on down the page, he recalls Tristan Tzara when he says that cut-ups belong to everyone, and compares the process to the ancient Greeks debating whether or not an item's weight affected the pace of the fall. Burroughs tosses out this notion of discussion; he's interested in pushing the items off the table, or as he says, "Cut the words and see how they fall" (Burroughs).

The Cut-up

While the first cut-ups were crude and exhaustive in processing, Burroughs and Gysin soon developed a system to quickly cut, sort and rearrange pages of writing. In “Cut-Ups Self-Explained,” Gysin details a column-cutting process resembling a geometric equation. The process is straightforward enough: cut the text into three columns, label them A, B, C. The process is detailed further beneath with Burroughs’ interpretations following.

The Column Cut



Photos: Pictured above are JPEG pictures of the column cuts as featured by Gysin in *The Third Mind*. The first photo features Gysin’s rules about dividing the columns. Gysin captions the photo: (The letters struck out were those sliced by my scissors. Now, permeate the columns to form the new words.) The second photo depicts an example of the column cuts. The title of the piece reads “Linear Rendering of texts A+B+C. The pictures come from the editor’s assembly manuscript featured in CMS40BOX13FOLDER141.

Gysin offers four possible permutations in the proceeding pages: ACB, BAC, A+CB, B+CA. He aligns the columns in particular arrangements and reads the sentences as they conjoin together. Pictured below is Gysin's first permutation with the provided text, offering insight into how the 'sliced' letters effected new words, or forced original construction during rearrangements.

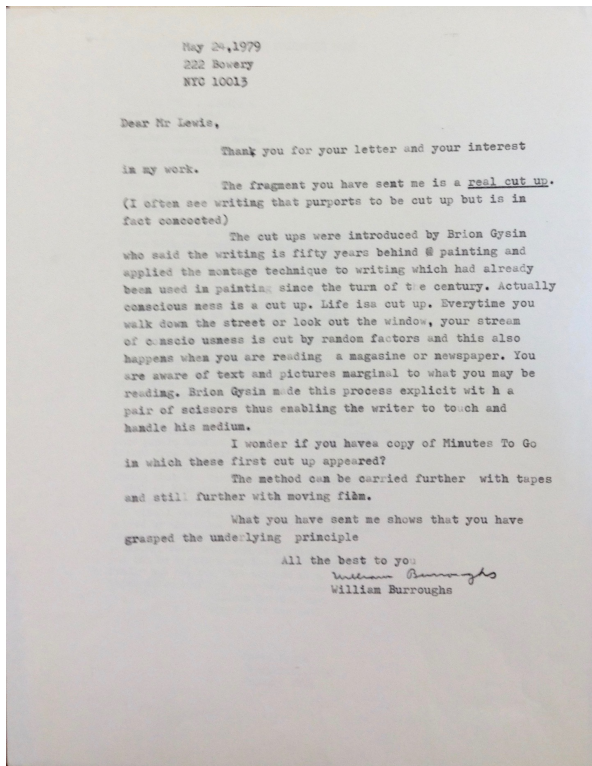
The Burroughs Cut

This wasn't the only method of the cut-up, however, as Burroughs developed a personal system alongside Gysin's. His approach consisted of slicing the page into four pieces, up the middle and across the side, then slice the margins off of the page and begin rearranging. A few pages earlier in *The Third Mind* Burroughs writes an explicit set of instructions for readers to start on their own, further supporting his claim that they're for everyone,

The method is simple. Here is one way to do it. Take a page. Like this page. Now cut down the middle and across the middle. You have four sections: 1 2 3 4 ... one two three four. Now rearrange the sections placing section four with section one and section two with section three. And you have a new page. Sometimes it says much the same thing. Sometimes something quite different...(Burroughs)

Featured in the stacks of the RBML at The Ohio State University is a series of fan letters in which Burroughs discourses about his cut-up techniques.⁶ In a particular letter addressed to a Mr. Lewis in Cincinnati, Ohio and dated May 24, 1979 (see photo) Burroughs writes of his cut-ups and their origins. Enclosed in the envelope to Mr. Burroughs was a letter asking for details about the cut-up technique, but alongside it was a request for Burroughs to look over Mr. Lewis' in-

⁶ The aforementioned fan-letter and the response from Burroughs are contained in folder 35 of Box 7 in Special Collections CMS 40.



cluded cut-up.⁷ The response from Burroughs applauds the cut-up as having the qualities of, “a real cut up,” after which he explains that he often sees, “writing that purports to be cut up but is in fact concocted” (Burroughs). While this detail may seem minute, it once again implies Burroughs’ strict regulation for the cut up: that it must be done in spontaneity; however, it also details the imaging of the cut-ups. The concoction of cut-up writing was

in fact entirely oppositional to the technique

itself. It was designed to handle and sort writing with the same treatment as imagery, and to break from that was to ruin the applicable qualities of the technique itself.

The texts used often varied from source to source and varied just as often between being the words of Burroughs and Gysin, or someone else’s entirely, such as Shakespeare or Rimbaud, as seen in the ‘cut-up collaborations.’ The segments selected were chosen due to their prose power, or as Gysin states, “more highly charged words” (Beiles).

The Fold-in

The fold-in method is a direct variation of the cut-up technique and was used extensively by Burroughs, most notably in his Nova Broadcast pamphlet *The Dead Star*. While discussing the fold-

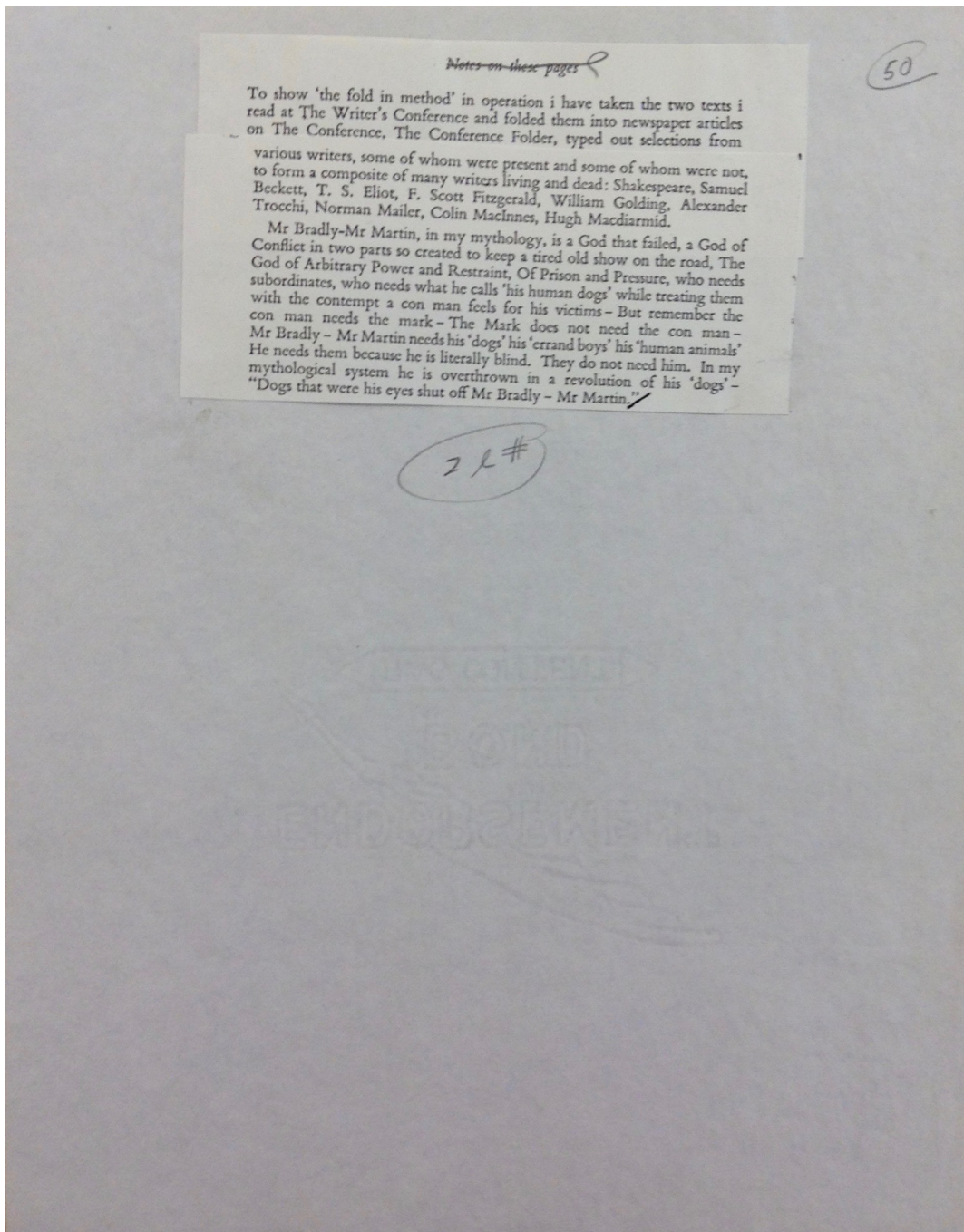
⁷ To respect the artists and intellectual privacy of Mr. Lewis, I have left out the enclosed cut-up and have relayed on Mr. Burroughs’ response.

in method in *The Third Mind* Burroughs discusses his lack of interest in exploring areas that have already been researched. He's interested in pushing boundaries and exploring foreign spaces of literature and art. Thus, he summarizes that, "Certainly if writing is to have a future it must at least catch up with the past and learn to use techniques that have been used for some time past in painting, music and film-" (Burroughs). Considering himself a navigator of the psyche, Burroughs developed the fold-in method in an attempt to induce a sense of déjà vu into his writing. Burroughs explains that this extension of the cut-up was first heavily used in his novels *Nova Express* and *The Ticket That Exploded*. Selected texts, either by Burroughs or other writers, were cut down the middle of the page and then laid onto another sheet. The resulting text is a composite of the two halves, offering a new narrative that references both previous works while maintaining an entirely new narrative track. Burroughs explains the déjà vu phenomenon in music when attempting to justify the method as a literary technique saying,

"For example I take page one and fold it into page one hundred-I insert the resulting composite as page ten-When the reader reads page ten he is flashing forward in time to page one hundred and back in time to page one[...] This method is of course used in music, where we are continually moved backward and forward on the time track by repetition and rearrangements of musical themes." (Burroughs)

Not only does Burroughs justify the method through comparative measures in film and music, but he also writes that the fold-ins often produced clearer texts that were easier to comprehend than the original had been. Burroughs goes further into the method, explaining that, "-Best results are usually obtained by placing pages dealing with subjects in juxtaposition" (Burroughs).

Photo: A picture of the rough draft of a fold-in as featured by Burroughs in *The Third Mind*. Burroughs notes that the selected text is comprised of two texts read at The Writers' Conference all folded up and reworked into this piece. The picture captures the first paragraph of Burroughs' provided example.



Formats: The Grid

While the cut-up technique garnered a lot of attention, Burroughs had already developed several ways to experiment with inducing spontaneity into his texts. In *The Third Mind* Burroughs discusses another format: the grid. The process consisted of passing prose through a “grid” drawn onto a piece of paper; the selected sentence would be passed through alternating squares. Burroughs offers that he,

Then ruled off a grid (Grid I) and wove the prose into it like start a sentence from J. Wain in square 1, continue in squares 3, 5, and 7. Now a sentence from Toynbee started in squares 2, 4, and 6. The reading of the grid back to straight prose can be done say one across and one down. (Burroughs)

One of the most interesting aspects of the grid format is that Burroughs is much more lenient with its follow through. While the regulations of the cut-up allowed for various materials from any number of sources, the process itself is explicitly outlined and exemplified in *The Third Mind*. The chapter detailing the grids, however, allows for a much more versatile usage. Burroughs offers that reading the interwoven texts from left to right will produce new and varied sentences, but he also notes that reading the squares from top to bottom can produce prolific output. Even further, Burroughs offers this style of composition as one of the most diverse approaches as it allows for mathematical adjustments to be made at one’s own will. Burroughs notes that his example units are squares, but that any style of unit is possible.

Scrapbooks

Alongside furthering the cut-up technique into other literary rearrangements, Burroughs had yet another form of composition: scrapbooks. Parts of the scrapbook collection reside in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Ohio State University, but by and far, the scrapbooks remain one of the most personal aspects of Burroughs' literary applications, or perhaps it is simply the least discussed form. Either way, the scrap collections offer a unique look into the mosaic-style composition that Burroughs so often compared his cut-ups too. Firstly, the layout style itself is a "cut-up" of bits of literature or photographs that Burroughs found interesting. As he collected these, he'd begin to compile them into pages in his scrapbook collection based off of similar themes or even names, but even that wasn't required,

Now, a scrapbook is just bits and pieces... piece of an old letter, clippings from the hometown newspaper, an invitation, an advertisement, a photo, a column of text...a mosaic of old times and places. (Burroughs)

While discussing the scrapbooks in *The Third Mind*, Burroughs mentions that collages act as reference points, with news articles often referencing each other, or similar names and events in a seemingly unnatural way. This is the perhaps the clearest visual depiction of Burroughs' motivation for such an interest into the techniques of spontaneity: to fight the 'Control Machine.'

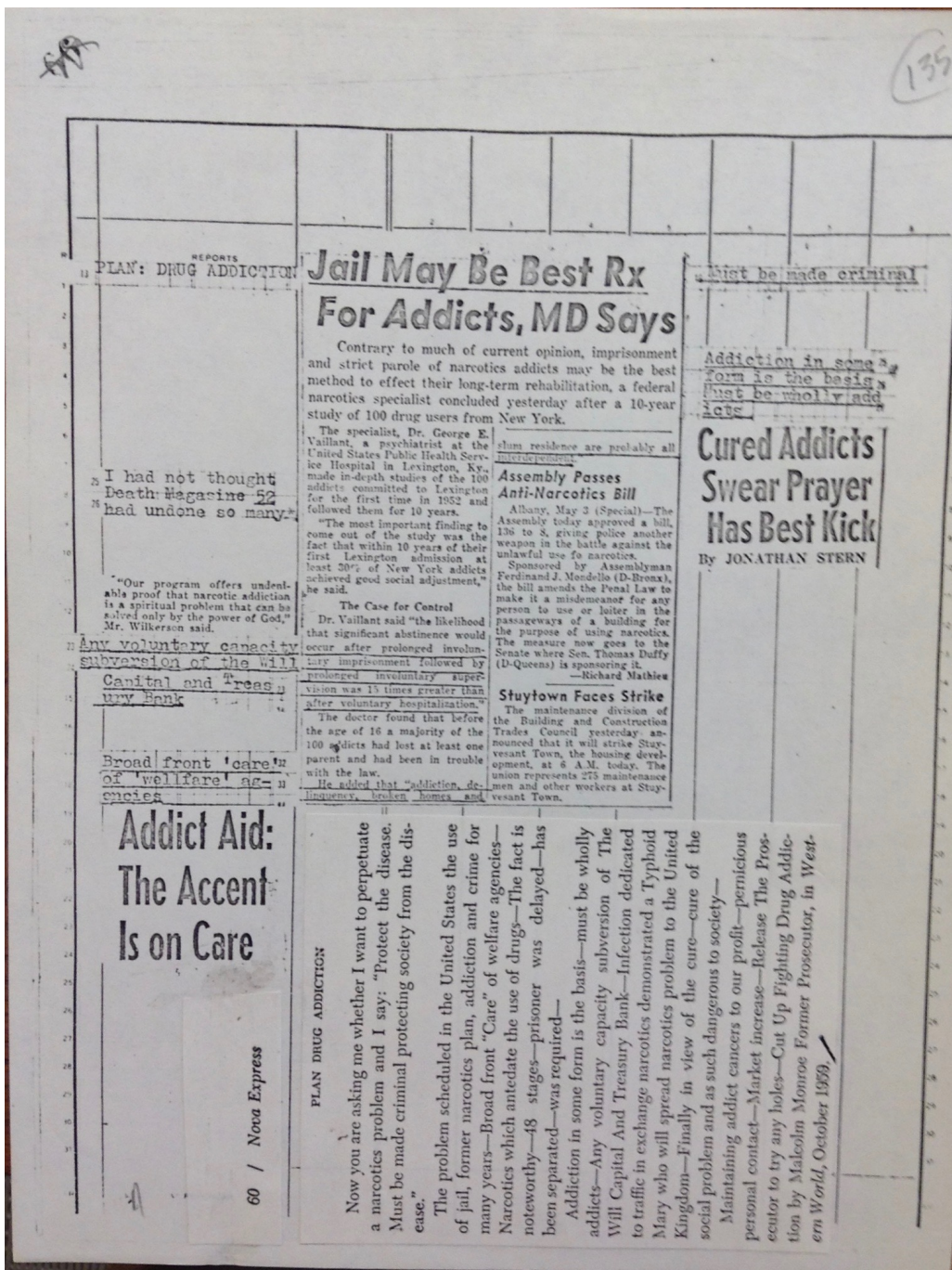


Photo: A compositional page from *The Third Mind* in RBML CMS40BOX13FOLDER141 depicting the editor's scan of a completed Burroughs scrapbook page.

“The word is now a virus.” (Burroughs)

Part 3: Controlling the Control Machine

Burroughs is often noted as an originator of the deconstruction movement and a proponent of abstractionism. Perhaps this is because Burroughs believed that words had become a preventative barrier to the train of human thought; and as literature progressed into the postmodern era, he sought to destroy these barriers by mutating his narrative style in the vein of imagism. That is to say that through embracing the cut-up technique’s spontaneous effects, Burroughs sought to break down the wall between art and language.

For Burroughs, words weren’t superior gateways to transcending images, but rather that, “written words are images in sequence.” (Burroughs lecture TS) Instead, he saw words as restrictive devices that sought to detail or create images in one’s mind through a meticulous and linear matter. By cutting clusters of phrases and words down the middle and rearranging them, Burroughs felt he enabled himself to see past the linear limits of the selected texts. With sequential restrictions entirely removed from a piece of work, or collections of work, Burroughs began noticing seemingly unnatural cross references within the detached bodies of words.⁸ Burroughs wrote of this phenomenon in *The Third Mind*, instructing the reader that they too had been awakened to the prevalent signs of ‘control,’

⁸ While this paper will focus on the linguistic and literary aspects of Burroughs’ experiments into the “cut-ups,” it would be impossible to not discuss his reasonings for continuing the experiments. Burroughs wrote in the opening introduction of *Queer* that he’d been motivated to write by a sudden exposure to the “ugly spirit” that had forced his hand in the killing of his wife, Joan Vollmer. While there has been much debate and controversy around this topic, it is impossible to ignore Burroughs’ conviction that the only way to fight the spirit was to write himself out of its control, and thus, according to him, came the cut-up.

“By this time you will have gained some insight into the Control Machine and how it operates. You will hear the disembodied voice which speaks through any newspaper on lines of association and juxtaposition. The mechanism has no voice of its own and can talk indirectly only through the words of others...speaking through comic strips...news items...advertisements...talking, above all, through names and numbers. (Burroughs)

The need for control manifested itself into the origins of Burroughs cut-ups through his selection of previously written material that he'd then recut alongside works of others or words of his writing. At the time of release, this strategy was considered a form of abstractionism, and Burroughs was seen as a proposer of deconstructionism. While Burroughs did incorporate aspects of abstraction and randomizing, it is the point of this essay to finally step away from depicting Burroughs as a Postmodern deconstructionist and transgressor. To combat this notion, the notion itself must first be identified and dissolved.

Firstly, Burroughs' use of the cut-up enabled him to abstract the actual words from their origin material, or in the early experiments, the authors of the words as they appeared on the page. The cut-ups enabled Burroughs to question someone's ability and authority to 'own' words, and he delved into ways of keeping their previous frame while shifting them significantly enough that they'd become works of his conjuring, or perhaps 'collaborations.'

These collaborative works were, at first, ways of distancing the material from their sources in attempts to study them on their own, or alongside other documents. However, it's important to note Burroughs' thoughts on the process, and while the procedure has become a staple of the postmodernist deconstruction, Burroughs himself did not believe that he was removing the words from their authors.

On the contrary, the *Junky* author felt that he was creating new "images" of, and with, the original author. In a 1966 interview with Conrad Knickerbocker featured in the introductory pages of

The Third Mind, Burroughs writes that source material is inherently subject to variances that others may apply to it, and that by the processes of applying these differences, the products themselves remain valid as continuations, not obstructions, of the original material. Burroughs writes of his Rimbaud cut-ups, "A page of Rimbaud cut up and rearranged will give you quite new images. Rimbaud images-real Rimbaud images-but new ones" (Burroughs).

Perhaps Burroughs' answer highlights his attempts to validate his method, but it seems to imply that he did not see his form of re-creation as a method of deconstruction. The Oxford English Dictionary provides two definitions for abstract: the first being, "To take away, extract, or remove (something); to move (a person or thing) away, withdraw" (abstract, v.) and the second being, "Of a word: denoting an idea, quality, or state rather than a concrete object" (abstract, adj. and n.).

Regarding the first definition provided, Burroughs' specific attention to naming the cut up product an image of Rimbaud rather than his own explicitly counteracts the first form of abstractionism. Burroughs did not believe he was removing the source from its material, but rather he was simply reforming it from the original work. The second provided definition speaks directly to dealing with language, and Burroughs' insistence upon the reality of his created materials opposes the adjective abstractionism within the cut-ups. But how does this relate? Well, to first begin analyzing the works of Burroughs outside of the label of 'deconstructionism,' lines must first be drawn between the perception of the works and the contextual evidence leading towards unification. Deconstructionism is often credited with the works of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, and his interests are often associated with the contradictory, or paradoxical, and binary assumptions of existence, knowledge, identity, and language. About semiotics and language, Derrida

wrote *le Différance*, a philosophical essay published in 1963 that explored the relationship between the signified and the signifier. According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the essay was Derrida's attempts,

to conjoin the differing and deferring aspects involved in arche-writing in a term that itself plays upon the distinction between the audible and the written. After all, what differentiates *différance* and *différence* is inaudible, and this means that distinguishing between them actually requires the written. (Reynolds)

Derrida believed that one gains knowledge through a simultaneously synchronic and diachronic approach; one must understand both the history of language while simultaneously learning the changing current use. The call for an ability to discern between the two methods led to the further studies into abstraction and deconstruction of the signifier from the signified. He sought to literally “break down” the sign, both in use and at its core. Deconstruction gained momentum during the 1960s, right alongside the developing avant-garde L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. poets and the rising Postmodern Theory.

Deconstruction offers two variants for fields of study, namely: the deconstruction of literature, and the deconstruction of philosophical beliefs. While the latter directly coincides with the postmodernist theories of Lyotard and Baudrillard, the first field seeks to apply the deconstructive research method to literature in hopes of exposing existing binaries within texts. Burroughs was no stranger to binaries, as much of his work explored the binary relations of each topic he chose to approach.

Whether that included attempting to purify them through exposing their existence and their endless oppositions or subverting them through undermining the Aristotelian thought pattern that

gave them life, Burroughs did not attempt to substrate the signifier from the signified. Instead, he sought to place words closer to their point of reference.

I: Purifying the Umbrella

In his attempts to clarify and expose the binary relations of signifiers to their modern usage, Burroughs explored the broad meanings that particular “meaningless” words carried with them. In his first lecture given during his CCNY course, Burroughs says,

Look at abstract words that have no referent-words like Communism, materialism, civilization [...] There are as many definitions as there are users of these words. According to Korzybski, a word that has no referent is a word that should be dropped from the language, and I would say, certain from the vocabulary of the writer. [...] In short, we have so many different phenomena lumped under this word that the use of the word can only lead to confusion. So we can drop the word altogether and simply describe the various and quite different political phenomena. (Burroughs)

Burroughs’ insistence upon dropping the words with endless referents, or perhaps no clear referent at all derived from what he surmised to be the propagation of confusion. Speaking to this, Burroughs continues in the lecture to digress from the genre and style labels applied to his own writing,

I have been accused of being an arch materialist and a bourgeois mystic. What do these words mean? Virtually nothing. And because they mean nothing you can argue about them for all eternity. Any words that have referents cannot be argued about; there it is—call it a desk, a table, call it whatever you like, but no argument is possible. All arguments stem from confusion, and all arguments are a waste of time unless your purpose is to cause confusion and waste time. (Burroughs)

But how does one discern the writing that seeks to confuse from the text that aims to clarify?

Burroughs partly prescribes this distinction to ‘omniscience’ in writing. Continuing further, Burroughs explores the limits placed upon screenwriters by the expected omniscience of the audience. Burroughs draws upon an example of attempting to set the weather, atmosphere, and time of an event on-screen as opposed to a described event on the page saying,

He cannot, for example, inform the reader that ‘It was a clear bright day in May of 1923, St. Louis Missouri.’ How does the film audience know that the month is May, the year 1923, the locale St. Louis? This information must be shown on screen...(Burroughs).⁹

While the connection might not seem obvious at first, Burroughs placed extensive value upon the ability to think in sustainable images, rather than in words and labels. In fact, Burroughs relied so heavily upon this trait that it became one of the few skills he relayed to the CCNY class as a required skill of writing saying, “The ability to think in concrete visual terms is almost essential to a writer. Generally speaking, if he can’t see it, hear it, feel it, smell it, he can’t write it” (Burroughs).

The emphasis placed upon images can be definitively felt in the exercises prescribed to the class. In one such exercise, Burroughs orders the students to describe a couch without actually using the label term “couch.” This, Burroughs believed, would force the students to see the object, the referent, rather than seeing the signifier. The implied distinction between ‘breaking down’ the signifier and prohibiting oneself from relying too heavily upon these supplemented terms is an important one, as it could explain the misconception of Burroughs as a deconstructionist. In the case of the couch exercise, Burroughs is not attempting to degrade or even remove the label ‘couch’ from the vocabulary, because it has a clear referent attached to it, similar to the table he offers in a previous example. Instead, Burroughs is asking the students to move away from the umbrella term to discuss aspects of the object, rather than to provide the label of the object and the supplement signifiers that come along with that supplement.¹⁰

⁹ Grammatical corrections have been made to the quoted materials. They were not revised in the CMS collections at The Ohio State University, but have been adjusted here for clarification.

¹⁰ In this way, Burroughs is instructing the students to see the couch in front of them, and the specific, individual qualities of the couch that sits before them. This, according to Burroughs, allows the students to see *that* couch as it really is, without their assumptive ideas about what *a* couch is.

The exercise attempts to move away from the generic label term, but still forces the student to work on describing the particular object before them. This task expects the student to prevent their minds from wandering and to instead remain present in the moment in order to create a more concrete visual image of the couch. William S. Burroughs relates this practice to the theology of meditation in Buddhism. What Buddhism calls “unimposed thought” Burroughs calls, “perception without preconception” (Burroughs).

Burroughs believed that minds trained to this would be able to ‘respond silently’ to texts and works of art, and this, he thought, would lead to minds to react without immediately seeking to place labels on objects, especially if these labels held no actual referent. At the second class of the Naropa Workshop, Burroughs quoted from Alfred Korzybski in saying that, “the objective level is not words and cannot be reached by words alone. We must point our finger and be silent” (Burroughs). This state of silence meant progressing thought processes to occur suddenly, without imposition, in concrete images rather than words. This recalls the previous notions of Egyptian hieroglyphs as Burroughs mentioned it in a previous class: the pictures pointed towards something, all visuals had clear referents, and all referents created distinct visuals upon being considered. And, according to Burroughs, it wasn’t until the development of the language counterpart to the hieroglyphics that these mediums finally divided, each becoming the counterpart to the other. The exercises by Burroughs in his classes instilled in students the ability to think of the current language in this format, offering them activities such as the “couch” to keep their minds on the object, not the label.

However, just before to the “couch” exercise in the same class, Burroughs presents the students with a “cup” exercise in which the students are to look at a cup and *let* their minds wander, but

only along association lines of the cup. The students are instructed to think of the cup, and every other cup that they have ever seen, in any variety of make. Burroughs says, “In fact, all the cups you have ever seen are by association connected to that cup” (Burroughs). While the second exercise directly counteracts the execution of the first, they share the same goal: they are forcing the student to think about the object in front of them in relation to its individual signified. By focusing on the couch without applying the label term to it, the students can touch, smell, feel the individual couch outside of its label. By considering the cup in relation to all cups one has ever interacted with, the opposite effect is achieved; the student becomes aware of how far the cup is from its signified and how closely it is connected to every other cup, simply because it is called “cup” and designed in a similar fashion. Through this developed interaction with the individual sign, the student is able to create an imagistic understanding of the various distances between signs.

Burroughs’ insistence upon silence being the pathway to these thought patterns is significant in that it seeks to step outside of written language as a final, resulting cause. It instead demands a recognition of, and understanding of, the relation between the signifier and the signified, but also the relation each has to other signifiers and signifieds alike. In this way, the silent state becomes the only place where one might find and study these extracted relations. Trained silence through associational pathway recognition can lead to the discovery of extracted signifier roots. This, Burroughs believed, was the ultimate tool to clearing confusion. By removing the signifiers from linear thought, and the signifiers from the signified’s expectations, Burroughs removes the ‘clutter’ of sounds and word descriptors in order to place the object closer to its signified, in silence.

Burroughs applied this same technique and belief to character creation. Along with the scrapbooking mentioned in Section 1, Burroughs created what he called “identikits.” These identikits were pages of a scrapbook devoted to an individual character. Using the space on this page, Burroughs would create sheets of information that detailed the specific fictitious characters, but only using sources and materials from the world around him. Rather than trying to write or create his characters, Burroughs would find them from dreams or daily life and construct them out of real “signifiers.” This helped the characters to flesh out, and allowed Burroughs to ‘meet’ his characters rather than write them,

For example, I meet a character in a dream; then I may find a photo in a magazine that looks like the character, or I may meet someone who looks like him in some respect. Usually, my characters are composites of many people—from dreams, photos, people I know and quite frequently characters in other writing. Over a period of years, I have filled a number of scrapbooks with these identikit pictures. (Burroughs)

Even the scrapbooks creations had to have concrete referents for Burroughs. These referents were used to clarify the characters and helped to flesh out the character as an individual within the larger story.¹¹

Burroughs was aware of symbolic representation and worked to attach the words in his vocabulary to actual, concrete images in attempts to begin bridging together the gap between the pictorial and manual alphabet aspects of our language.¹² It went further than that, though, as Burroughs worked to chain even his ideas to a solid grounding. This wasn’t a new way of writing to Burroughs, this was the way that writing had started, and it was the ultimate goal to get back to,

¹¹ Burroughs proposes this technique after just having discussed the importance that dreams have had upon his writing, which he recorded even prior to his first writings, to which he credits that, “at least 40% of my material derives from dreams” (Burroughs).

¹² American language utilizes a “manual alphabet” that offers a structure similar to signing languages but uses individual letters to form word phrases that denote the signified, or the ideal item mentioned. Pictorial writing exclusively deals in image referents. The hybrid of these two systems is known as a logographic writing system, to which Burroughs attributed the first division of pictorial writing from a manual alphabet.

To agree on a name for an object presupposed symbolic representation: the label will henceforth represent the object. The label evokes a picture of the object in the mind. So you have the beginning of writing: pictorial representation. (Burroughs)

Upon beginning each conversation, certain rules are already predefined. Contained within these regulations are the presupposed objects that will be referred to, and the items that denote their reference have already been agreed upon too, by the language structure itself. Upon entering this structural language system meant to exchange information (discourse or dialogue) two people have already upon a set of labels and the objects, even if the images brought to each's mind might differ, they share the same agreed-upon referent. These rules are how people can converse, discuss, and come to conclusions upon ideologies. It is also directly linked to the barriers bred by language differences, such as in the case of "dent," which means a tooth in French, but denotes the area of damage caused by an impact or collision from another source in American English.¹³

Burroughs said of universal language system "All Speak" that it,

"would be a composite of the most precise, melodious, expressive, trenchant, [?], pungent, graphic words selected from all languages. Language would incorporate Korzybski's suggested deletions. To eliminate the is of identity find the language where it does not exist. To eliminate abstract words. (Burroughs)

Similar to the more 'highly charged words' of the cut-ups, Burroughs believed that only the best words and most meaningful, grounded words should make the transition to the universal language. He did not, however, offer any interest in deconstructing those words from their meanings, but only to deconstruct meaningless words from our vocabularies. This important distinction provides insight into his alignment with Korzybski and offers a clear view of his divergence from deconstruction and abstraction.

¹³ While this calls to mind le Différance, Burroughs was aware of this, too. Derrida sought to explore and explain the differences or to trace the differences and contradictions that arise when utilizing a written language to relate and distinguish elements from each other. Burroughs applied a different theory to this, once again relating back to Korzybski, in his understanding of "All Speak," a constructed, universal language.

Burroughs fought back against the abstraction by calling for the abstracted words to be removed from the language altogether. But what about *le Différance*? In the sense of deferral, Burroughs and Derrida divide here. While Derrida believed that words could never truly summon the signs they represented, he also believed that the addition of more words, words that differed from the targeted word, could aid the defining process by creating a definition of differences.¹⁴ For Derrida, signs will always call upon others, whether different or similar, forever onwards in attempts to create a distinction vivid and individual enough that a definition can be achieved. Because of this belief, Derrida's strides in deconstruction often stepped away from the idea that there is an ultimate referent or foundation. For him, this meant that words and phrases could never be guaranteed a 'staple' meaning.¹⁵ Derrida believed that perception of words and text depended entirely upon that individual's perception, which is regularly subjected to the individual's rapidly changing subjectivity.

Burroughs was also aware of the binary relations between textual alphabets, logographic writing systems, and the spoken word. Thus, Burroughs pushed for the words to be 'rubbed out' in thought processing. Believing that images could yield a power of understanding that transcended subjectivity and control directly influenced Burroughs' use of the cut-ups as a tool. After delving into language and removing the 'clutter' of words without clear referent images, Burroughs believed the next step was to look onward in silence. By creating a visual language, however, Burroughs believed that the face of subjective meaning could be changed. Language could be created in clear, precise images.

¹⁴ For Derrida, this meant that words unable to summon signs could only be understood through differencing the word from others.

¹⁵ Thus, once more reaffirming his belief that understanding and mastery of language requires both diachronic and synchronic knowledge.

In a drafted transcript of "Notes on Dreams" for a class presentation, Burroughs delves into exploring the binary relation within certain words, and a contradiction existing inside word structure formation,

The word supernatural contains a built-in contradiction. If something happens, it becomes natural by the fact of happening. "Supernatural" is a slanted word, referring to occurrences that contradict so-called natural laws set up by scientists postulating what they think should and should not happen in a cause-and-effect universe which they themselves have postulated, a universe already called into question by Black Holes. (Burroughs)

Burroughs prescribes that this contradiction is built into the word by the frame of current governing thought and that the factual implications offering the word its inherent contradiction are actually derivative of individual and subjective outlook manipulation within the 'Control Machine.'¹⁶

II: Subverting the Schism

While the Control Machine varies, it is widely understood to be represented by institutions of thought, academia, and government, among others. In 1961 Burroughs' first interview was published in a small-print magazine entitled *Journal for the Protection of All Beings*. The interview was conducted by Gregory Corso and Allen Ginsberg, and for being the first Burroughs interview ever to be published, it is surprisingly direct and unrestricted when divulging into Burroughs' outlook. Gregory Corso proposes a question about whether or not a 'definite' change has occurred in the makeup of humanity, to which Burroughs replies,

Yes, I can give you a precise answer to that. I feel that the change, the mutation in consciousness, will occur spontaneously once certain pressures now in operation are removed. I feel that the principal instrument of monopoly and control that prevents expansion of consciousness is the word lines controlling thought, feeling and apparent sensory impressions of the human host. [...] The forward step must be made in silence. We detach ourselves from word forms – this can be accom-

¹⁶ The 'Control Machine' refers to the organizations governing over human interactions, consumerism, politics, and even thought processing. For Burroughs, this consisted of entities, such as government, that sought to create distractions and confuse. These distractions prevent transcendence past the 'word virus,' which reaches as far as the way a reader's eyes move around the text on a page. The Western implementation of Aristotelian thought processing was one of Burroughs' biggest targets, and his distrust of it manifested into a general distrust of the systems that he felt promoted this inhibiting and easily manipulated pattern of thought.

plished by substituting for words, letters, concepts, verbal concepts, other modes of expressions: for example, color. [...] In other words, man must get away from verbal forms to attain the consciousness, that which is there to be perceived at hand. (Corso)¹⁷

The Oxford English Dictionary's definition of 'mutate' reads, "To undergo change; to be transformed into something else" (mutate, v.). The mutation process Burroughs is speaking of is the break in Aristotelian thought processing, and the eventual transcendence into another form of thought. Burroughs called language a 'virus' and saw it as a barrier to advancing human logic, but he did not intend to destroy the word. Rather, he aspired to transcend it, and allow it to be overcome by imagism.

Burroughs' use of the cut-ups seems to imply the reunification of image and word, but in a transcended form of signs.

The physical cutting and rearranging of phrases and texts like puzzle pieces indicates a hieroglyphical style of imagism, and rather than abstracting the signifier from the signified, Burroughs rearranges these to create new images of the subjected signified. This is achieved through changing our perceptive abilities, or the process through which we receive the signifier. That is to say, Burroughs' use of the cut-up texts creates mental films occurring entirely all at once by breaking linear narration at its source: the source material itself.

The last claim made by Burroughs in the quote is a call to step away from 'word forms' to attain a higher level of consciousness. William S. Burroughs attributed a large part of inappropriate actions to the human language, believing that it acted as a sort of gate through which people could propagate this inappropriateness,

¹⁷ The 'pressures' that Burroughs seemed so certain of refers to the control machine of societies regulators, an idea that appears throughout *The Nova Trilogy* as the malicious use of signification to alter the identities of populations, and to subliminate radically altered hierarchies within a subject for purposes of domination by an external entity.

[...] the human ability to use a symbolic system which can represent situations in their actual absence. The human ability to abstract, to construct artifacts, to plan and to provide for future dangers and contingencies can become a crippling biologic disadvantage when confusion exists between the symbol and the object. And this is inherent in the structure of western languages, in the IS of identity which postulate that the symbol is the object. (Burroughs)

The ‘inappropriateness’ Burroughs is referring to is the confusion of language, such as the misunderstanding of signs and their relations to each other. It went further than this, however, for Burroughs, as he believed that there was a definitive technique used by the ‘control machine’ to prey on this misunderstanding of signs. In the first lecture of the CCNY course, Burroughs discusses this method and its use in the journalism of that time, specifically mentioning Hearst as a proposer of this system.¹⁸ Burroughs tells the class that,

There is a definite technology for the negative use of words to cause confusion, to create and aggravate conflicts and to discredit opponents. This is the opposite of what a writer does. Here, the more abstract words and meaningless statements, the better. This technology has been developed in the mass media by Hearst and others, refined in LIFE and TIME, and carried still further by the CIA in such subsidized periodicals as Encounter. (Burroughs)

Hearst’s yellow journalism created a sensational new writing style that sought to profit throughout exploitation of false, or unreliable sources. Instead, the papers used catchy slogans, stylized fonts, and visually arresting front page arrangements to make sales. The capitalist style of journalism relied upon psychological studies of consumer’s reactions to images, word arrangements, and interests to bend the reality of the signs. This meant intentionally exploiting the perception of the user, and using it to guide the consumer to make more purchases, more newspapers, of which would yield the same result. The deceptive approach to the coverage of truth did not sit well with Burroughs, and his statements imply a greater sense of conviction.

¹⁸ The ‘negative system’ Burroughs accuses Hearst of is known as “Yellow Journalism,” which uses sensational headlines and under researched if researched at all, stories to sell papers. Hearst created his own business, Hearst Communications, which thrived off of selling newspaper publications filled with yellow journalism.

The appropriation of fear and confusion in attempts to mass-market printed papers resided with Burroughs as a propagation of the inappropriateness making the English language so filled with barriers, binaries, and meaningless words. On March 13, 1974, Burroughs began a lecture called “Magic of Journalism.” The talk delves into the differences in executing two styles of writing: creative writing and journalism. Burroughs begins the class by informing students to underline the following,

[...] by distortion, misquotation, slanting, playing up and playing down, the manipulators of the word and image bring events and people into their orbit of control, where anything is true if they say it is. [...] There is a precise technology for turning the public off a book, and perhaps the most important factor is falsification. (Burroughs)

Burroughs believed that the manipulation of word phrases and images utilized so heavily in journalism weren’t simply used to turn people on to something, but also *off* of certain texts and ideas. Alongside distorting the meaning of, and implications of texts, Burroughs cites “falsification” as the crucial factor in this technology. Not only does the falsification relate to the news stories presented within the journal, but also the details surrounding the creation of the pieces themselves. Burroughs specifically addresses a book titled *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, in which he provides an example of critique the book received concerning its hurried construction and clumsy publication. Burroughs ridicules these comments as he notes that the book, “which took seven years to write and reads like it took that long to write it, is almost a musical composition, very carefully put together” (Burroughs).

The world of journalism, according to Burroughs, was a place dominated by the intentions of the author, playing upon the perceptions of the reader. The reader’s reaction to a text in journalism would be directly felt at time of release, but it would also go on to shape the composition and

content of the next issue. This, he believed, created a world in which the validity of statements directly competed with the expected sales of said statement, and ultimately, the sales would, in turn, affect the validity of that story, even if only in a minuscule way. This, for Burroughs, was detrimental to the validity itself, as it has now been influenced by an external overseer; an overseer who is placing an expected income value alongside its headline. In this way, the truth had become a binary situation inside of journalism. If it must come down to true printings or fabricated stories sure to sell, the outcome would forever be influenced by both, regardless of which side it sat on, and this would always be a loss for the reader.

This intentional misapplication of signs stood, for Burroughs, as the propagating cause to the effect of the in-appropriation within a language. Through use of words without clear referents and an apparent misuse, or perhaps intentional confusion of, signifiers, journalism enabled itself to induce unnecessary panic, fear, political and ideological concern. By summoning these metaphysical and social concerns each day in the media, the media itself was able to play a hand in the public's perception of these ideas and terms. This play of hand would directly affect social movements, but also the public's reaction to social movements which, through the right play of signs, could be supported or diminished at their will. For Burroughs, this made journalism a fantastical and deadly place.

The *Junky* author was no stranger to the center of literary debates himself, however, and his statements in the lecture call back upon this. Upon mentioning *Nova Express* in class, Burroughs immediately delves into the critics he received upon publishing it,

He is trying to prevent people from buying the book. And he does the by bringing the book into his derogatory orbit, through brazen falsifications, and the more brazen, the better. This kind of review can almost be done on a computer program. It is simply a matter of putting in the most inapplicable statements. (Burroughs)

This wasn't the only technology; however, as Burroughs explains to the class that there yet another technique devised to prey upon the ignorances of an audience, no matter who was in question. Burroughs boiled this obfuscation of news down to a simple procedure: the use of words that the reader will not understand. This system could be applied to any level of the text, with any level of expected reading audience, and the outcome would be identical. It all relied upon the obfuscation of signs and definitions, and often, these two went hand in hand. Burroughs summarizes,

There is another technique: the use of words that the reader will not understand, even a highly literate reader. When you see a word you don't know on a page, it create an aura of disinterest and distaste for the context. [...] What happens when you see a word on a page and you don't recognize it? It makes a hole in your mind, a hole in the page in front of you, and you don't want to read any further because you are stuck back there in that hole. (Burroughs)

This stood in firm opposition to what Burroughs believed a writer should be trying to do: clarify. Pulling from the lecturer's statements about filmmaking and scriptwriting, the intentions towards creating images are echoed even louder here. The hieroglyphic systems and their persistence upon clear denotations that resonated so strongly with Burroughs are absent in this field, and Burroughs believes that this may be attributed to the intentions of each medium. In Burroughs' quest, much like with hieroglyphs, he sought to attain the state of 'silence' from which he could look upon signifieds, ideals, and intentions without the clutter of generic, meaningless, and usually inapplicable label terms. The purposes of journalism, according to Burroughs, do not share the same goal, and instead, seek to confuse and abstract words from clear images in an exploitative manner. Burroughs ends the class by stating,

In short, this trick is the opposite of what a writer does. It consists in inserting as much non-visual material as possible, whether this be words that are not understood, or are simply meaningless, or statements that cannot be visualized [...] This is, as you see, exactly the opposite from what a writer attempts, which is to be as visual as possible. For lessons in how not to write, consult your

local CIA man. If he is not available, either the Institute for Cultural Freedom or the American Field Service will do just as well. (Burroughs)

There was a way out, according to Burroughs, of the controlling aspects influencing the signs of society. Relying on what Burroughs had traced from the originators of cut-ups and constant attention to the collage-like perception of reality, Burroughs reinvented a system through which he believed he could quiet the internal monologue and cut out the control.

While his methods and explanations were often contradictory, Burroughs integrated the collage into writing and created meaning from it in a new way. Believing that cutting into texts of the present could expose hints of the past and future, Burroughs developed methods to induce déjà-vu, randomness, and altered thought processes within the reader. Even further, Burroughs was able to examine the intent of others, whether consciously or subconsciously intended and supplemented, by cutting up and rearranging texts. Through the use of this method, Burroughs believed he could highlight, and possibly eliminate, the misdirection, persuasion, and confusion propagated in mass media communications.

III: Cutting out Control

It became an objective of Burroughs to dispel the inappropriateness, or the virus, from the language. This consisted of many forms of attack upon the Aristotelian style of thought. Aside from breaking from linear narrative, however, Burroughs went even further, and by structuring writing around his perception of the perception of reality, Burroughs induced a collage-like effect into his work.

In the essay titled “Towards a Field Theory of Word,” Burroughs discusses the phenomenon of the word virus,

My basic word theory is that the word is literally a virus and has not been recognized as such because it has achieved a state of stable symbiosis with the host [...] Word then, according to my theory is not a passive tool of the human organism, but a separate virus organism which acts in accordance with the laws of other viruses. A virus must maintain itself and replicate itself, so the word itself will always try to make sense to the host. (Burroughs)

The author believed that the word virus abided by another set of rules, acting as a real virus itself rather than a linguistic fallacy. But what did this mean? Well, primarily that the human language was not a tool of assistance, but rather a restrictive barrier through which humans struggled to make sense of things inadequately. Burroughs notes that the language behaves like a virus by attempting to further its own sense, and ultimately continued use, through a symbiotic relationship of requiring the use of words in attempts to describe other words and their meanings in entirety. Therefore, the word not only defines reality, but plays a direct part in its capabilities of being described. He goes further to explain a tape recorder experiment involving three tapes being played in subsequent orders. The first tape, he explains, includes the sounds of a male ape in a sexually frantic state. The second tape contains the sounds of a female ape in a sexually frantic state, while the third tape provides the sound of the male ape's death. Burroughs proceeds to describe the splicing as, "The word made flesh in death-orgasm" (Burroughs). While the explanation is crude, the splicing of cassette recordings allows a new recording to be created: a new set of events made real by the restructuring of their capture; a technique very much in the same vein of *The Third Mind's* alternative take on collaboration à la the metaphysically created third mind of collaborative efforts.

By combining the tapes and allowing the sounds to intermingle, they become something new and self-contained in the process. According to Burroughs, "Unloosing this virus from the word could have more effect than unloosing the power of the atom because all hate, fear, and lust is

contained in the word” (Burroughs). Burroughs writes in the essay that the alternating tapes unleash something within each other, and that upon being heard, the culmination of them can induce the same reactionary feelings as if the events had actually transpired and been recorded. This causes effects within the body of the listener that are not only triggered by each tape individually, but also by the binary activation of the combined tapes. Similarly, this is the same binary style activation through which Burroughs understood the words continued attempts to make sense of itself,

So stimulated, the word virus reverts to its original malignant form, transferred from one host to another by the word itself, that is, by what people say when they are attacked by the virus, the voices inside them dripping from the most banal words and so spreading the plague. (Burroughs)

While the ‘plague’ as mentioned above contained the referent-less words, it also pertained to the constant reinforcement of linear thought. Burroughs’ use of collage in his narrative structure further induced the juxtaposition of signs against the perception of surface reality. The fragments of remembered reality stuck out to Burroughs, and his discussion of them in the lecture places the cut-ups as sequential to these fragments,

Collage is closer to the actual facts of perception than representational painting. Take a walk or a ride down a crowded street and then attempt to reconstruct what you have seen. You have seen fragments of street signs, people cut in two by signs and mailboxes, reflections in shop windows, flashbacks and flash forwards, stationary and moving people and objects. [...] An accurate reconstruction then would be a collage of fragments. (Burroughs)

This is to say that these collage cut-ups came closer to grasping the imagist quality of these fragmented memories. The mind’s jump from one remembrance to another through the occasion of surface materials and fragmented moments creates an all-at-once realization, or appreciation of the remembered time. Burroughs believed the cut-ups, made possible by their very own collo- cation, tapped into this immediacy and were able to induce it within the reader by relaying to them the message in the same format through which they received it: juxtaposed, random, and all

at once. Not only are they nonlinear, but their ability to place the reader near the signified allows the passages to move beyond the word; that is, they become like puzzle pieces of images that enable the reader to relive the juxtaposed fragments in an ensemble. In the first lecture of the CCNY courses, Burroughs discusses a title's ability to create an image within the reader. Burroughs notes that a good image can get a reader to buy and read a book, while a bad title can draw either a bad image or no image at all, but neither will sell the book. While examining the reception of the film *The Cut-Ups* in London, Burroughs writes that a theater manager requested the film to be withdrawn from the showing after finding endless articles left behind in the theater, more than he'd ever found in his career. Burroughs surmises that,

So undoubtedly the film *Cut-ups* did produce strong reactions, and many viewers were disoriented by seeing it. The same thing happened when non-representational paintings were first exhibited. (Burroughs)

And they certainly did. The initial reception of the cut-up was shaky, and while it wasn't to the degree of *Junky*, it was met with questions of the text's literary merit. But perhaps, as Burroughs says, the reception was simply due to the strong reactions produced by the juxtaposition of typically inviting materials. Burroughs prescribes the disorientation to the non-representational aspects of the paintings exhibited, the very same qualities that made them so different from paintings of prior. Examining the cut-ups, the same effect can be witnessed, only in a somewhat reversed order. The immediate proximity of the cut-up words to their signifiers creates a disorienting feeling of rapid movement. Burroughs identifies this an inherent part of the writing process, even without the cut-ups, as he says in the sixth lecture, "The writing process, which begins long before the writer actually starts putting words on paper, emerges as a complex rotational system of associations" (Burroughs).

Burroughs' belief that these associations could be taken advantage of and used against the general public through a technology of confusion regularly manifested in his experimental writing.

Whether it included political cut-ups or the cut-up trilogy, the cut-up period of Burroughs' writing explored the control machine most extensively, and a close examination of the societal regulators present in the trilogy offer a deeper insight into Burroughs' own motivation into the cut-ups.

In the essay titled "Language out of Language: Excavating the Roots of Culture Jamming and Postmodern Activism from William S. Burroughs' *Nova* Trilogy" Todd Tietchen writes that,

Burroughs suggests that human subjectivity is constituted or internalized, intersubjective discourses which are in turn (mis)recognized as individual. One of Burroughs' chief concerns in the *Nova* books is the "Reality Script," an entrenched system of signification deployed insidiously into his characters' collective subjectivity by the "Reality Studio" - society's technological and Master-Signifying Authorities. Action within the Reality Script or "biologic film" is determined by "viral" fictions which graft together mass-society through intersubjective, ideological penetration of subjectivity, the contents of which belong, yet simultaneously do not belong, to the infected subject. (Tietchen)

The internalized, intersubjective discourses bring to mind the internal monologue that Burroughs sought to quiet in his chase for the state of silence, and the Reality Studio is an exact stand in for the control machine. Tietchen writes in the essay that the *Nova* trilogy examines the relationship between society and the Reality Studio, and the effects of this relationship upon reality itself. The Reality Studio uses their knowledge, and simultaneously the public's lack of knowledge, on signs to distort and edit images, texts, and their apparent meanings.¹⁹

The control machine of the Reality Studio utilizes this system of signification, coupled with the negative technology of confusion as mentioned by Burroughs, to alter the apparent meaning of a text to effectively play upon the confusion of a word's inherent meaning. The words without

¹⁹ The word "apparent" here stands in contradiction to "inherent," as the Reality Studio seeks to alter the meaning of the text so well that its inherent meaning is changed, and that the perception of it, or even its 'apparent' meaning is thus also misperceived.

clear referents, in turn, become defined by their perceived, catch-all meanings, while only ever confusing the word further from its closest referent. The *Nova* trilogy explores this theme and the infectious state through which it has spread to mass communications. The Reality Script reads as a sort of virus in itself: the negative technology of confusion has reached so far into the trenches of mass-perceived reality, that it has in-turn become a defining quality of reality itself. But if this isn't *actually* reality, then it must be something else. Burroughs calls it a "Reality Script," fed to the public so successfully by the Reality Studio that the public has now come to accept it as reality itself, which Tietchen refers to in his essay as the "Symbolic Order—a pre-determined structure of social codes that we understand as social reality" (Tietchen). How we are perceived directly affects our ability to perceive ourselves in a way that differs from that original perception. It also makes it harder to understand that perception of ourselves, especially when it stands in stark contrast to our internal beliefs. Knowledge then becomes locked into a paradoxical cycle of either/or: one's perception of oneself is either consciously or subconsciously in adherence to or defiance of all other aspects of perception, whether external or internal. Burroughs did not like this paradox and wrote about the either/or of Western culture stating that "This is a western hang-up which goes back to the either/or error, where psyche is one thing and a physical skill is another, and never the twain shall meet" (Burroughs).

Burroughs' use of the cut-ups, similar to his belief of the past and future *leaks*, suggests that he believed he could cut out the control from the general media and possibly remove the either/or. His extensive use of the cut-up experiments with newspapers and headlines offer a very different motive than incorporating collage into his narrative: he sought to expose hidden messages and ulterior motives within traditional publications. In an interview with Corso and Ginsberg, Bur-

roughs was asked how one may take a step forward towards the ‘silent state’ he so often wrote of. Burroughs provides an answer, but he also provides a cut-up version of that answer, indicating that the cut-ups were crucial,

William Burroughs: Forward steps are made by giving up old armor because words are built into you - in the soft typewriter of the womb you do not realize the word-armor you carry; for example when you read this page your eyes move irresistibly from left to right following the words that you have been accustomed to. Now try breaking up part of the page like this:

Are there or just we can translate many solutions for example color word color in the soft typewriter into political conflicts to attain consciousness monopoly and control

Gregory Corso: Reading that it seems you end up where you began, with politics and it’s nomenclature: conflict, attain, solution, monopoly, control - so what kind of help is that?

William Burroughs: Precisely what I was saying - if you talk you always end up with politics, it gets nowhere. (Corso)

The interview goes on, and eventually, Burroughs is asked about the control machine itself, to which he calls for the destruction of the machine after having used the device to expose the dangers of machine control. The paradoxical event that Burroughs is discussing is similar to the cut-ups in that it shares the utilization of the same method from that which it seeks to destroy. Burroughs’ believed that the ulterior motives and messages that lay within text could be exposed by cutting them up and rearranging the words, often giving the same message at the end, albeit juxtaposed and fragmented, as it had at the start. So, by doctoring the message with the same method it was originally doctored, Burroughs believed that the originally intended statements could be made visible, as well as the limitations and confusion of signs made clear upon the fragmentation. So, how does one know that the cut-ups themselves have not been doctored, and why did Burroughs move away from the cut-ups?

In a recent personal interview with James Grauerholz, he discussed the contradictory nature of Burroughs’ philosophical outlook surrounding the cut-ups. Grauerholz noted that Burroughs would have been unaware and disinterested in the conversation of Jacques Derrida and deconstructionism, mentioning that it wasn’t an interest of Burroughs. While James notes that much of

the New Criticism was reactionary to works by Burroughs and other artists, he also states that Burroughs wouldn't have read any of the theories. Upon asking James about Burroughs' thoughts on abstraction, he stated that,

William Burroughs was not an abstract thinker. Abstraction as it applies to classic arts or the literary field is, well, in my opinion, is that it is a semiotic field where there are signs, symbols, indexes. [...] The point is that abstraction refers to development in art where the representation is indirect. (Grauerholz)

As the interview continues on, Grauerholz notes the author's use of words at face value and his frequency to ignore the term of art or literary value also applied to a word. James finds this contradictory nature of terms problematic and insists upon it being taken into account while examining the cut-ups and their applicable use,

One of the things about all of his, well, he stakes out a lot of philosophical positions, but many of them are directly contradictory to each other. [...] But William's stances, his statements, about language and society, the kind of thing that you'd find in *The Job* or *The Adding Machine*, let's call it his 'op-ed' writings. Those things often, if you really study them, are contradictory. (Grauerholz)

The first, and perhaps most often noted, contradiction is the randomness of the cut-ups. James states that the cut-up, "in general, is aleatory. It's the principle chance of randomness. How random is random" (Burroughs). This is important to note as the earliest processes of the cut-ups involved meticulous hours spent pouring into the cut-up pieces to find the most prolific literary phrases. Even the quoted inspiration of Burroughs' cut-ups involves a layer of randomness that is missing from his methods. For James, this selective process barred all mathematical and non-compositional poetics from ever being considered a cut-up,

The reason why a certain word lines up with another word, well there's another reason, which is how wide the paper is, and how large the letters are. But, you can't track the reason down. Therefore, it's random. That's important. The other thing is that the cut-up must be curated. It's chosen. There are no mathematical poetics or algorithmic poetics that are a cut up. Period. (Grauerholz)

And thus, an important distinction must be made between the varieties of cut-ups: the random from the selected. In countless folders at The Ohio State University's Rare Books and Manuscripts Library are files of cut-ups performed by Burroughs. Some cut-ups contained within are simply shoved into their place accordingly and left untouched with no way of knowing what source material was used and when it was composed, or how. However, some cut-ups have been left in a packaged format, including the documents of origin and how it was diced. Some of these materials indicate a clear fold, cut, and reassemble arrangement. Some, however, appear to show an actual selection method that counters the randomness of the first variety. While Burroughs contradicts himself during explanations of the cut-ups and their motivations, his file notes indicate randomness *and* selection as crucial factors of the cut-ups, rather than an either/or methodology. Firstly, the letter to the man in Cincinnati specifically calls out an appreciation for the randomness utilized in the supplemented cut-up, simultaneously condemning the pre-selected cut-ups he often saw. Secondly, in the same discussion of the premiere of the film *Cut-ups*, Burroughs notes how easily cut-ups, both text, and film, can be reworked and staged to appear random. Burroughs also seems to note that he alternates between the two,

You take a section of film, cut it into segments, and rearrange. This differs from editing since you cannot foresee the result, and you will get new images and words and meanings. [...] Working with film cut-ups you can, of course, edit and choose the most effective sequences, just as with tape and text cut-ups. **However, in *Cut-Ups* there was no editing of the material.**(Burroughs)²⁰

The quote, alongside the bolding of the last line, seem to imply Burroughs' awareness of the contradictory nature of the method. This shouldn't be a surprise for an author so well oriented with binary characteristics, and one who has explored them so often. In the beginning interview of *The Third Mind*, Burroughs discusses the accumulation of images with the interviewer, who

²⁰ The quoted segment is presented exactly as found in the stacks of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library. The page appears to be a typescript of the discussion, and the last line is bolded. The effect has been duplicated here.

notes that Burroughs both celebrates and condemns the accumulation of images, to which Burroughs states,

Yes, it's part of the paradox of anyone who is working with word and image, and after all, that is what a writer is still doing. Painter too. Cut-ups establish new connections between images, and one's range of vision consequently expands. (Burroughs)

So, his awareness of the binary situation surrounding his developing technique and its motivation implies that he was not only aware of the contradictions, but that he felt he must further explore them, regardless of their implications upon the cut-ups. Taking into consideration the essay by Tietchen and the interview between Corso and Burroughs, it is also worth noting that Burroughs' variances in either applying randomness or a selective processing varying at the level of source material. For the latter, Burroughs states that there is a negative technology at work within the writing of mass media and societal regulators. His application of the cut-ups to this style of source holds a different motive than the method of randomness: Burroughs believes that meanings are being conveyed in secrecy within the texts and that by cutting them up, they are made visible.

The important distinction here is that Burroughs believed there was *already* a message waiting to be exposed. In this way, the political cut-ups, or those of selective processing, hold a motive entirely their own: he's seeking to prevent their negative technology of confusion by creating a positive technology of clarity; he's cutting up the virus. Early methods of the cut-up, however, such as in *Minutes to Go* and even in inspirations like Tristan Tzara, seek to remove the 'genius' from the creative process by enabling anyone to pick up, cut up, and rearrange texts for prolific meaning. They strive to apply randomness in order to create a rich meaning of their own, without authorial intent pertaining to the vocabulary and instead only to the arrangement.

The contradictory nature of the motivation was explored in the class discussions with the *couch* and *cup* exercises, teaching students to think in associations. Upon asking James about this, he stated that it was a practice in studying a utilitarian use of words and how they've come to be perceived that way. Upon mentioning Burroughs' time studying with Korzybski, James states that,

He was, in a crude way, asking to look behind the word. [...] He had studied with Korzybski, [...] and Burroughs was basically, when he had these exercises, he was asking people to examine when they used the word, what did they mean? This also applies over into his theories about hieroglyphics and visual, ideograms in general, right? Idea drawings. He was very interested in visual letters, non-alphabetic languages. The question is: do we think the way we think because of the language we think in? Or is our language the way it is because of the way that we think? Or, as William would always say, why does it have to be either or? What about both ands? (Grauerholz)

Burroughs' use of the cut-ups in both random order and selective processes implies that he sought to explore both 'ands' rather than having to mitigate to an either/or. The contradictory nature was not explicit to the cut-ups, however, and as Burroughs implied in the earlier statement, working with word and image brings about a particular set of expected contradictions. One such contradiction occurred in Burroughs' process of character creation, and again in his explanation of the steps taken to create a character. The aforementioned 'identikits' helped Burroughs create definitive, concrete visuals for characters that Burroughs conjured. This allowed his character to have a grounding in reality and allowed Burroughs to listen to them and write them as a real person. In a class transcript from lecture six, Burroughs also addresses the steps taken when trying to imitate a real person into a novel as a character and notes that to know someone, "well is a limitation in the construction of a fictional character" (Burroughs).

So why did Burroughs move away from the cut-ups? His intentions to explore both 'ands' coupled with his quickly developing method and vast source material could have provided cut-ups

for years to come. Instead, however, Burroughs moved away from the cut-ups in his novels after finishing out the *Nova* trilogy. In interviews, Burroughs has the motivation as simply being able to transfer the skills to regular writing, something he directly dismisses in the opening interview of *The Third Mind*. James provided another explanation during our interview, “One reason that he gave was that his Cut-Up trilogy didn’t fucking sell” (Grauerholz). James discussed the sales of the cut-up novels alongside Burroughs’ crew of editors. According to James, they were all very much in support of Burroughs and wouldn’t have told him what they thought about the sales. When asking James about the cut-ups and his time spent with them, he notes that he offered Burroughs a different use for the cut-ups: rather than trying to utilize them to create nonlinear narratives that were the length of novels, he should use them in smaller quantities, to induce an effect within the passage. James reflected that,

I worked with him on *Cities of the Red Night*, and my input of the cut-ups, as we were sequencing and editing it, was that he should just have bursts of cut-ups. And he saw what I meant and he agreed, and he did that. So he changes over and reduces the cut-up to the purpose of a special effect, kind of like a dream-like sequence. (Grauerholz)

So Burroughs’ movements away from cutting up and rearranging texts weren’t due to a disheartened sense of their application, but instead because they weren’t profitable. The use of cut-ups in attempts to induce dream-like sequences within the text still shares the same goal of Burroughs’ extensive application of the method: to stop and examine the words. While discussing the cut-ups with James, he stated that the cut-ups sought to “express silence in words” (Grauerholz). Further, he stated that the insistence upon words with strong referents, combined with the expression of silence, according to Burroughs, would “stop the outpouring of words. It would get people to stop and look at the words before them and, more importantly, allow them to see the

object on the other side” (Grauerholz). So, Burroughs sought to “rub” the word out of one’s way of seeing the object. This would not only fight the confusion being spread through mass mediums, but would also allow very little room for control through causes of confusion. If there were a strong visual reference for items and ideals, then there would be no need for an outpouring of useless, and perhaps inapplicable, descriptor and like-wise terms attempting to capture and explain it. Tietchen, examining the cut-ups in a different way, ends his essay by stating that,

The goal of the cut-up (and of Culture Jamming) is to release the signifier into an ambulatory state which makes such a return (to the Real) possible; if language accounts for absence (as post-structuralist suggest), cutting-up reveals the underlying absence (or Real silence) which language attempts to conceal. [...] According to Burroughs, the radical (re) productivity embodied in gestures such as the cut-up leads to a loss of symbolic support, a liminal period between ideological discourses in which the possibility of self-definition is momentarily realized. (Tietchen)

While Tietchen understands that the cut-ups can induce a trajectory path for signifiers, he (mis)applies the goal of their movement, and ultimately understands the ambulatory state to allow the individual to create a momentary and spontaneous definition of the signifier upon reacting with the cut-up. The cut-ups did create a trajectory path for the signifiers, but the most important aspect is that they moved *with* the signified.

This paired movement, rather than singular, would prevent referent-less words and abstract ideals to enter the ambulatory state alongside the signifier and signified. Thus, echoing Burroughs a new language could be created from those that had traversed alongside their signified, allowing for a language that prevents confusion. More importantly, this would allow for a language that avoids manipulative control through the negative technology of writing. What Tietchen refers to as a ‘loss’ of symbolic support structures in the process of the cut-ups is actually a stronger system of support, as it has actually reworked the structure of the reader’s understanding. The reader has now placed the signified alongside the signifier, but even more crucial is that

the reader has ‘rubbed’ out the inapplicable descriptor terms standing in the way of full realization and understanding.

Tietchen believed that Burroughs sought to create a systematic approach to cutting-up and creating momentarily and individually defined understandings. Instead, however, Burroughs sought to cut-out the confusion and move towards a more image-influenced discourse that would prevent individualized definitions from creating barriers between language. These barriers, to Burroughs, would allow the control machine to easily manipulate the capitalist consumer. Thus, by transcending the misunderstanding and cutting-out confusion, language could never be allowed to become a restrictive device of humanity again.

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